

The Baptism of Our Lord (B) (2020)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 10, 2021

Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Today is the commemoration of the baptism of Jesus. From the earliest times in the church, early January was the occasion for Christians to commemorate the beginnings of Jesus. In particular, the Epiphany, which we celebrated last week. And today, the baptism of Jesus. And traditionally, although not for us this year, the first miracle of Jesus— turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana. Collectively, these events, along with the birth in Bethlehem, are epiphanies, revelations of Jesus, the light come into the world. There is an audience in each case. The shepherds in the first story. The Magi in the second story. John the Baptist and those who gathered at the river in the third story. And the disciples and wedding guests in the fourth story. In each case, the uniqueness of Jesus is disclosed. Each case is an Epiphany. And each case is a beginning.

It's probably due to the fact that the church was born and raised in the Roman Empire that these events are all clustered around the New Year. In the northern hemisphere, mid-winter is when the sun begins to shine a little more. And it is when the new year begins. So the beginnings of the life of Jesus and the growing light of God in Jesus traditionally were memorialized at this time. That's why, nearly two thousand years later, you and I are gathered here in observance of the baptism of Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus is particularly noteworthy for us because our congregation is named for the dove which appears in this story. The Holy Spirit appears like a dove — an unusual description that nevertheless is attested by all four gospel writers. There are two times in the New Testament when the Holy Spirit descends vertically from heaven. One of them is the baptism of Jesus, in which the descent of the Spirit is like a dove. The other event is commonly called Pentecost, in which the descent of the Spirit is like the wind. The architecture of our sanctuary creates its own sermon by fusing the two events. The baptism event is individual. The Pentecost event is collective. In our sanctuary, the dove— at least a modern abstraction of the Dove— descends upon the collective. Fusing the baptism of Jesus with the Pentecost event.

But what does this have to do with you? Well, you are involved as an individual. And as part of the collective. Like Jesus, you are baptized, and that affects you personally. The Holy Spirit descends upon you individually. Like the apostles, we are the church, and the Holy Spirit descends upon us collectively. You know who understood this clearly was a guy named Martin Luther. Some of you once had to memorize his Small Catechism. "The Holy Spirit has called

me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as – in the same way – likewise he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” The work of the Holy Spirit is upon you, the individual. And upon us, the community. That’s what the sanctuary’s architecture– the sermon embedded in our sanctuary– signifies. The individual nature of the Spirit, symbolized by the Dove. The community nature of the Spirit, symbolized by the wind and the flames of fire of Pentecost.

For you, this is a new calendar year. Perhaps you have made resolutions for the year ahead. Surely you have hopes for the year ahead. There is a new congress, and a new state legislature, and soon a new president and a new cabinet. The death toll of Covid keeps setting records, but we hope for a change soon. So you surely have expectations for the year ahead. Hopeful expectations, dreadful expectations. Both. And today’s theme is of beginnings. Beginnings and new beginnings. Long commemorated by the church at this time of year because you and I are not the only ones who look to the future in the month of January. Our first reading this morning makes that starkly clear: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.* A wind swept across the face of the waters. Translators get to decide whether to translate that word as “wind” or as “breath” or as “spirit.” The King James translators said, “The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” The Spirit is involved in beginnings.

In your new beginnings this year, what is the meaning of the Dove? At least these three things. For you. First, the Dove means the radical presence of God in your life. Today’s gospel is the only gospel that says that the heavens were torn apart. They weren’t opened. They were torn the way fabric is torn, the way the Incredible Hulk’s clothes get torn open. The people who wrote the Bible thought that there was a barrier up there, a kind of ceiling, the firmament. And that is shredded in today’s gospel. Signifying the importance and the urgency of God’s Spirit descending to be with Jesus. And that applies to you, as well. Why do Lutherans and so many other Christians baptize infants? Because we believe that the Holy Spirit will come upon that infant and guide it to Jesus Christ as it grows. Nobody comes to Jesus on their own. The Spirit is working long before you are ever aware of Jesus. The Spirit is involved in beginnings.

So if nothing else, the boundary between heaven and earth is torn open. The Spirit is the radical presence of God in your life. God created you, Jesus saved you, but it’s the Spirit who guides you today and tomorrow. It’s not a casual presence. It’s an urgent and radical presence. A holy presence. A Holy Spirit. With you. As you look to what this new year will bring.

Second, the descending Dove is an affirmation of you. The baptism of Jesus is accompanied by these words *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* Jesus is uniquely the Son of God. But you also are affirmed by God as this Dove descends upon you. The apostle Paul just marvels at this affirmation. We are adopted. As though we are street urchins, dirty little orphans, Oliver Twist, adopted into a household of honor and treasure and privilege. This huge uplifting. This huge affirmation. Paul can’t quit talking about it. *When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if*

children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. He has to say that three times: heirs, heirs, heirs. *klēronomoi* that affirmation. But see how that happens with the Spirit, *that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit.*

So those are two things that the vertical descent of the dove means for you as you think about the future and the year ahead. The radical presence of God. And a radical affirmation and elevation of you into his household. And the third and last thing is mission. You have the presence and power of God, and you have a place in the household, but you also have assignments. Important work, mission, purpose. The great work of God's kingdom often seems tiny in the eyes of the world. But you are called to his vineyard, to cultivate God's goodness. *Look around you*, Jesus says, *"Look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting."* [John 4:35] You only have to open the newspaper or turn on the television to see the hurt and the loss and the hopelessness in the world. A little love will go a very long way. Five loaves and two fishes can feed a multitude. You have vocation, you have mission, you have agency to do something about it. The dove descends, and Jesus begins his ministry. The dove descends, and you begin your ministry.

It's the beginning of a new year. And the Baptism of our Lord Jesus is about beginnings. *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.* The Spirit is part of every beginning. And as the Dove gave Jesus the presence of God, the affirmation of God, and the work of God, so the Dove gives to you and me the presence of God, the affirmation of God, and the work of God. I hope for a good year, but it may be a bad year. I pray for peace and goodwill, but I don't know how those prayers will be answered. I seek more life and less death, but there are forces beyond my control. But for better or worse, the year 2021 is God's year, and his Holy Spirit gathers, enlightens, and keeps us at this— and every— beginning. Amen.